Perspectives of the role of CEE countries in shaping the EU policy towards new Eastern neighbours

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On 1 May 2004 the European Union witnessed by far the biggest enlargement in its history. The accession of ten mostly ex-communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe will considerably change the nature of the Union, although the effects are difficult to assess only one year after the accession. One of the areas where the enlargement can potentially have a serious impact is the EU foreign policy, including how the EU engages in Wider Europe and what sort of policies it adopts vis-à-vis the so-called “new neighbours”.

Prior to the 2004 enlargement, it was often assumed in EU-15 that this expansion will, *inter alia*, shift the centre of gravity of the Union as well as its foreign policy focus to the East. This caused some anxiety among the old member states, as countries at the Eastern shore of the current Union were not a priority for the EU. The reality was that different member states pushed for privileged relations with countries to which they were bound by historical, cultural or economic links, such as Spain to Latin America, France to Maghreb countries or the UK to Commonwealth states. Given the mixed record of the EU in conceiving a common policy towards these regions, the accession was seen as a potential danger for the consistency and viability of EU foreign policy by adding yet another priority on top.

However, the impact of the accession of CEE countries in this respect was overestimated. Firstly, all the new member states, except for Poland, are small or medium sized countries. This gives them less leverage in influencing the EU foreign

policy, which tends to be driven by the big players. Secondly, it was wrong to assume that the new member states would act as a block in pushing the “Eastern” agenda in the EU. This is because the term “East” is very broad and encompasses a wide range of countries and regions along the EU Eastern border. Each of the new member states has its particular interests and agendas in this region, however, they are not identical and overlap only partially. This makes it more difficult to propose a convincing plan to the other EU partners how to deal with the region as a whole. Thirdly, there is no consistent foreign policy co-ordination between the new member states, and if there are some attempts, they not seem to be very successful. Thus within the new EU member states, several subgroups emerge in terms of their “Eastern” policy agenda at the EU level.

One group would encompass those countries that would like the EU to adopt a coherent and quite hard-line approach towards Russia. The prime proponents of this policy would be the three Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), supported by Poland. The interest of the Balts in Russia stems from the fact that it is still seen as a threat, either economically or politically, albeit after the NATO accession less militarily. The impeachment of Rolandas Paksas in Lithuania in April 2004 shows that Russia still has a pervasive influence in the Baltic societies, using its intelligence service or even organized crime. Economically, the Balts are still heavily dependent on Russia´s energy supplies. The issue of Russian minorities in Latvia and Estonia is consistently raised by Russia at different international fora, such as EU-Russia summits or OSCE. The absence of border treaties (except for Lithuania which still has not been ratified by Duma) adds to the suspicions of Russian intentions. The EU could provide the Balts with leverage on Russia if there was a consistent policy at EU-level. But the Balts are missing sufficient influence in the EU yet to conceive such policy. Many of the EU states are not willing to sacrifice good relations with Russia just because of Balts´ concerns. But the Baltic states do not lead by example either – there is no co-ordination of Russian policy among them either, and in fact they have handled the relations with Russia in very different ways. For instance Lithuania relied very much on the conciliatory approach and handled bilateral relations with Russia relatively well, perhaps due to the absence of Russian minority. Estonia keeps a rather low profile while Latvia is relying very much on US support, as well as on mobilising allies for its hard-line approach in the EU.

Because Poland is much less vulnerable to Russian influence, its support for a harder EU approach towards Russia is based mainly on geopolitical calculations. Poland does not want to perceive itself to be at the border between the EU and the Russian "sphere of influence". This can also explain the activism of Poland in countries such as Ukraine and Belarus, with the ultimate aim of getting them out of the Russian orbit to the European one. The importance of the Russian agenda for Poland rests in the recognition that the key to any further rapprochement between the EU and countries such as Ukraine or Moldova still lies largely in Moscow.

On the contrary, the other CEE states – Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia – adopted a much more low-profile approach to Russia, because the bilateral relations lack the contentious points as in the previous case. They seem to have aligned with the EU mainstream, determined by the UK-France-Germany trio.

The reality of recent developments indicates that it would be very difficult for the Balts and Poles to coerce a genuine common stance of the EU vis-à-vis Russia. What we witnessed recently is an attempt of some states, namely Germany, France and Italy, to develop their own policy in this sense. Their initiatives include organising quadrilateral meetings (Chirac in March 2005) or proposing bilateral initiatives, such as energy dialogue between Schröder and Putin, ostentatiously neglecting the other EU partners. This plays very much into the hands of Russian government, because it gives Putin much stronger negotiating position than if the EU was able to speak with one voice.

The other group of countries would be those who advocate the EU enlargement to the East. Officially, the enlargement is supported by the governments of all the new member states, and equally endorsed by the overwhelming enthusiasm of the public opinion in these countries[1]. The divergence comes as to which countries the CEE governments prioritise for the EU accession.

[1] For the most recent data, refer to the standard Eurobarometer 63. Eurobarometer is a survey of public opinion relating to EU issues across EU-25.

For Poland, the issue of Ukraine plays a crucial component of its Eastern policy, not least in its support for EU accession. The motives for the Polish support can also be explained by various factors: concerns about Poland´s geopolitical security, driven by the belief that the enlargement should not stop at Poland´s Eastern borders, idea of historical reconciliation (alike to what happened vis-à-vis Germany), necessity to anchor Kyiv´s reforms by providing the incentive of EU accession as well as pragmatic considerations relating to the improvement in entrepreneurship and business environment which would foster mutual economic ties. The enthusiasm of Poland is likely to be shared by the Baltic countries whose ultimate goal is to limit the Russian influence in Eastern Europe. This can be demonstrated by the Lithuanian activism during the Orange revolution, when Lithuania aligned with Poland in steering the EU policy towards Ukraine[2]. The support can be expected also from the other Central European countries, especially from Slovakia and Hungary. Both of these states share a border with Ukraine, thus the potential accession would alleviate the burden of guarding the external EU frontier, and would help the re-instalment of economic and social ties across the border, disrupted by the imposition of visas. Moreover, the Hungarian minority in Ukraine gets the country higher on the Hungarian agenda, as the protection of Hungarian minorities abroad is one of the main long-term priorities of Hungarian foreign policy. The Czech Republic and Slovenia will be much more reserved in its enthusiasm towards Ukraine, although for the Czech Republic the issue of Ukrainian labour migration features significantly in the national discourse.

However, the support for the Ukrainian accession and generally EU policy towards this country is not likely to be received with the same enthusiasm across Central and Eastern Europe. Also the regional initiatives (such as Visegrád) bear little fruit in this respect, and the Polish activism meets with a very general and lukewarm support of the Visegrád partners. For instance in 2000, the foreign ministers of the Czech Republic and Slovakia notified their Polish and Hungarian counterparts of the unilateral decisions to impose visas on Ukrainians as part of the EU Justice and Home Affairs *acquis*, without trying to negotiate the postponement of this move closer to actual EU accession or without engaging Kyiv in consultations, which was met with

[2] This refers particularly to the Solana-Kwasniewski-Adamkus visit to Kyiv in December 2004 to negotiate the way out of the electoral impasse.

criticism on the Polish part. Also the Polish proposal (non-paper) for the EU neighbourhood policy, circulated in January 2003, received little support from Prague, Bratislava or Budapest. The diminished enthusiasm for the accession of Ukraine can be explained by the increased "Europeanization" of foreign policy of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary or Slovenia as opposed to Poland or the Baltic states. The Ukrainian accession is simply seen as something that is "not on the table" at the moment. This is further exacerbated by the concerns of the political representations in CEE countries with internal problems in the EU, such as the failure to ratify the Constitutional Treaty or the 2007-2013 budget negotiations. Furthermore, the countries referred to see the Ukrainian agenda too much intertwined with the Russian dossier, and it seems they are oscillating between support of regional partners and the EU mainstream which is cautious about intimidating Russia by providing Ukraine a perspective of EU membership. Because the accession of Ukraine is not seen as something crucial to the security and stability of these countries, potentially much more pragmatic arguments can come to the fore. For instance will Ukraine become a direct competitor for structural and regional transfers from EU budget, or will the Ukrainian cheap labour force provoke the same arguments about "labour dumping" and "delocalisation" as we have seen in the old EU in relation to 2004 enlargement, or will the free movement of labour cause even greater influx of Ukrainian workers to Central Europe?

The rather reserved attitude towards the EU aspirations of Ukraine as well as towards developing pro-active EU policy in this direction can also be explained by a "deprioritisation" of the Eastern agenda in the foreign policy of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and to some extent Hungary in course of 1990´s, as opposed to Poland or the Baltic countries. The former group views the Western Balkan region as a priority for the EU foreign policy and for the enlargement. This can be explained by both particular and general factors: in case of Hungary by enduring links to Croatia and the presence of Hungarian ethnic minority in Vojvodina region of Serbia[3], in case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia mainly by the cultural links to Southern Slavs, reminiscences of the Little Entente or the activism of their diplomacies in the region. The support for these countries is further eased by the fact that the EU is already

[3] The Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, consisting of roughly 300,000 ethnic Hungarians, will be the largest Hungarian minority dwelling outside the EU, after the accession of Romania in 2007/2008.

active in the Balkans (e.g. EU operation Concordia in Macedonia, police mission in Bosnia or the economic reconstruction pillar of the UNMIK mission in Kosovo) and Western Balkan countries received a clear recognition of their membership eligibility by the EU[4]. Thus the push for more EU involvement is seen as a continuation of already existing EU commitments. The importance of the issue was highlighted by a strong opposition by Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia to the recent (March 2005) EU Council decision not to open the accession talks with Croatia, due to the alleged non-cooperation with the Hague tribunal for war crimes in former Yugoslavia[5]. The leaders of these countries argued that the launch of negotiations with Croatia will have a positive effect on the other countries in the region, and thus will contribute to the overall stability and security in this part of Europe.

However, even the Western Balkans seem to be off the EU agenda at the moment (apart from Croatia). It is obvious that without solving the issue of the final status of Kosovo, the rapprochement with Serbia will not move ahead. But mainly the failure of referenda on the EU constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands threw the whole issue of enlargement into uncertainty, and it is often quoted to be the first victim of the current malaise in the EU. This would apply even more to Ukraine, which – unlike the Western Balkan countries – was not yet recognized as a candidate for EU accession. Despite a very strong activism of Yuschenko on this front and an overwhelming support for the European choice of Ukraine expressed by the European Parliament[6], the EU leaders are very cautious in accepting any commitments or making any premature promises. The EU concerns over Ukraine link to the uncertainty of future development and irreversibility of the process started by the Orange revolution. It is clear that even Yuschenko got this message, having acknowledged that Ukraine has to do the homework first and then think about pushing for the candidate status. Thus the issue would probably be raised again as late as in 2007, when the implementation of the ENP Action Plan will be evaluated. Further progress depends on how the reforms in Ukraine proceed as well as on the

[4] Presidency Conclusions, Thessaloniki European Council, June 2003

[5] This relates to the failure of Croatian authorities to surrender General Ante Gotovina to the Tribunal, required by the Chief Prosecutor Carla del Ponte

[6] In the plenary vote on 13 January 2004, European Parliament recognized the "substantially fair elections" in Ukraine and called on the Council and Commission to reconsider the framework of EU-Ukrainian relations other than the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The vote passed with 467 MEPs in favour, 19 against and 7 abstentions.

internal developments in the EU and whether– especially with the new leadership in France – the current constitutional crisis can be overcome.

As for the remaining two countries in the Eastern vicinity of the EU – Belarus and Moldova, the picture is even more blurry. None of the new member states seems eager to get these countries higher on the EU agenda. In case of Belarus, a certain activism can be traced but it is based mainly NGO-driven, focused at attempts to boost support for civil society or political dissidents. But the official posts are taking this issue up, too, such as the newly established Unit for Transformation Co-operation in the Czech Foreign Ministry, making Belarus one of the focal countries along with Cuba and Myanmar. The emphasis on human rights and democratic conditionality is becoming a strong element in the foreign policy of Central and Eastern European countries. For this reason, more activism can be expected in relation to Belarus in the future. However, at the EU level, the relations are likely to remain frozen as long as Lukaschenko stays in power. As for Moldova, the interest is likely to increase when Romania joins the EU in 2007/2008. The two countries are culturally very close, but also a lot of Moldovans hold double citizenship, which can potentially have far-reaching consequences after the Romanian accession[7].

Thus, the new member states cannot be expected to act as a bloc in pushing the Eastern agenda in the EU. They all have the stakes in the relations with new EU neighbours, but they overlap only partially and are not co-ordinated consistently. This somehow decreases their capacity to be the driving force behind the Eastern policy of the EU. Still, they are going to remain the most active actors in the EU-25 in this sense.

Poland and the Baltic countries would be seen as the most activist countries in the region, although their motives and tools can be different: while the Balts will be more pre-occupied with the EU adopting a common policy towards Russia, Poland will be pushing more for the recognition of European aspirations of Ukraine. Slovakia and Hungary are likely to support Poland in some of its endeavours towards Ukraine, however, their focus would be very much on Western Balkans rather than on the NIS countries. As for the remaining members of the group – the Czech Republic and

[7] Those Moldovans who have Romanian citizenship would automatically become EU citizens, with all the rights arising thereof

Slovenia - their Eastern policy has the lowest profile. These countries are likely to oscillate between the EU mainstream and support for the activist regional partners (especially Poland). They align with Hungary and Slovakia in support for more EU involvement in Western Balkans, however, generally their foreign policy is going to be much more westward looking.